

from the specification screen of FIG. 5. However, the information on the screen of FIG. 8 need not be identical to that shown in FIG. 5. In general, if there is a difference, FIG. 8 would contain somewhat more detailed information.

FIG. 8 is also arranged in the form of a template, with specific entries shown in boldface. It is assumed that the system has stored different templates for different kinds of products. The template shown in FIG. 8 is clearly applicable only to printers. Unlike the case of the template of FIG. 5, the user does not make any choices and does not supply any information when viewing this screen. Instead, it is the system which "fills in" the information indicated on the template. The user is simply prompted to press any key to continue. The system waits for a keystroke, in block 71, and then returns to block 40, where the user can again select a product to investigate. Thus, if the user, after reading the detailed specifications, wants to order the product, the order can be placed by selecting the product again, from the menu, in blocks 41 and 49, and indicating the appropriate choice in block 57. The system can also be programmed so that the user does not need to return to block 40 after viewing product specifications. The system can query the user on whether the user wants to place an order, and from which vendor. This modification is also within the scope of the invention.

If, in test 27, the system determines that the user has not selected a product search, the system continues with test 73. Test 73 determines whether the user has selected another service from the Main Menu. In the example of FIG. 3, test 73 determines whether the user has selected any of item Nos. 4-8. If not, the program ends, in block 75. If so, the system performs the service, in block 74, and then terminates the program in block 75.

Item No. 4 on the main menu enables the user to view information on new products and special promotions. In effect, the system provides the user with a "bulletin board" of special notices from the management of the system, or from one or more suppliers. This bulletin board may include information of virtually any kind that may be of interest to users of the system. In particular, it may alert the user to new products which have only recently become available. This bulletin board may include one or more pages of information, some or all of which can be viewed at the user's option. The user can be given the choice of leaving this part of the program at any point.

Item No. 5 can be used to cancel an order previously made. Cancellation is possible if the user has been given a transaction number, or identifier, as mentioned above. The system can then transmit a cancellation notice, either by mail or electronically, to the appropriate supplier.

Item No. 6 enables the user to return defective merchandise. Again, the user will need a transaction identifier, and the system will assign a Return Merchandise Authorization number. The system can transmit the information to the supplier, and the supplier can expect to receive the merchandise from the user.

Item No. 7 allows the user to obtain information about any supplier listed on the system. The system can be programmed to prompt the user to identify the supplier either by number (i.e. using the numbers appearing on the display exemplified by FIG. 7), or by name. In the latter case, the system would search its database, and display information about every company whose name contains the word(s) entered by the user. In gen-

eral, the information displayed for each company will be somewhat more detailed than that shown in FIG. 7. The information shown in FIG. 7 should be more limited, because the aim of the latter display is to show as many suppliers of a particular product as possible. But virtually any amount of information about a supplier can be included in the database, for display to the user upon request.

Item No. 8 enables the user to communicate with the management of the system. This option can be, in effect, an electronic mailbox, wherein the user can note complaints about the system or about a supplier. The user can also offer suggestions for improvement of the data formats, etc. This option could also be used to verify that the system received the user's order, to enable the user to apply for credit from suppliers, or for other purposes.

Note that the options shown in FIG. 3 are only exemplary, and not limiting. One or more of the options can be deleted, and options not present can be added, within the scope of the invention.

In the examples given above, it was assumed that the user decided to locate and purchase a printer, i.e. a piece of hardware. A similar procedure is used for other types of products or services. For example, if the user selects Item No. 2, from the Main Menu, then the system, in block 29, will display a menu of types of software. For example, the user can choose from a list of software applications such as accounting, communications, database management, scientific applications, games, computer languages, operating systems, and others. The specification screen displayed in block 35 would then contain criteria pertaining to software. The program would otherwise operate in the same way as described above. A similar procedure can be used for Item No. 3 of the Main Menu. In the latter case, the user would identify the field in which a consultant is desired, and would enter, in block 37, details such as level of experience and possibly a range of hourly rates. The system would then search its database and list the software consultants fulfilling the user's criteria. In the case of software consultants, there would usually be no "product" to order, but instead the user would be given a telephone number and could call the consultant directly.

Note that the information about products, services, and suppliers must, in general, be updated periodically. The operator of the system can update the database, at regular intervals, based on information received from the suppliers. The system can also be programmed to allow direct access, by suppliers, to the database, so that the suppliers themselves can update their information whenever necessary.

Although the invention has been described with respect to certain specific examples, it is apparent that many variations are possible. The screen formats shown are only a few of the many arrangements that can be used. The amount and type of data shown on the screen displays can be varied considerably. The arrangement of the program steps can also be modified in many ways. Such modifications will be apparent to those skilled in the art, and are intended to be included within the spirit and scope of the following claims.

What is claimed is:

1. Apparatus for assisting a user in locating and purchasing computer equipment, comprising:
  - (a) means for displaying, to the user, a menu of types of computer equipment,